ACCUSATIONS AND AMLO: LEGITIMIZING FEMICIDE RESPONSES THROUGH POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Emme Richards

Abstract

Discourse is integral to understanding how administrative actions are interpreted by the public, and political actors hold the power of language as they attempt to appease policy dissenters and prove legitimacy at a national and international level. This research analyzes how the Mexican presidential administration legitimizes the political action taken to address the intentional killing of women based on their gender, known as femicide. Utilizing a critical discourse analysis framework, 57 press conference transcripts are analyzed spanning November 2018 to December 2020 from various leaders within the Mexican presidential administration. These transcripts reveal the use of four key rhetorical strategies by political actors from the administration to justify their federal femicide response when accused of inaction and inadequacy: conflation, virtue signaling, deflection, and generalization. This study finds that the administration attempted to prove policy legitimacy and minimize culpability by conflating femicide with other crimes, signaling federal virtue, deflecting attention away from bureaucratic responsibility, and generalizing response strategies. Additionally, a quantitative assessment of the four strategies' frequencies exposes their extensive usage during the time period studied. These findings provide a framework to identify and interrogate rhetorical legitimization, allowing researchers to better navigate relational dynamics between political actors, their rhetoric, bureaucratic policy response, and the reaction of the public. In all, this research may be applied to evaluate administrations dealing with backlash across the globe.

Keywords: femicide, discourse analysis, Mexico, patriarchy, gender-based violence, gender-based killing of women, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, AMLO, clumping, virtue signaling, deflection, generalization

Introduction

Femicide is defined as "the misogynous killing of women by men, motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women, thus to be investigated in 'the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society'" (Corradi et al. 2016, 977). Since the 1990s, Mexico has drawn global attention over the prevalence of femicide in the nation (Adams). In 2021, over 1,000 Mexican women were brutally slaughtered in gender-motivated crimes, making Mexico the second Latin American country regarding the frequency of femicide (Sanchez and Pesce 2022). Andres Manuel Lopéz Obrador (referred to as AMLO), the current Mexican president, has publicly expressed his sorrow and frustration regarding femicide (Forbes 2020). He politically presents himself as a progressive who ensures gender equality in his administration and works against aggressive masculinity. However, he and his administration have been accused of failing to protect female citizens and prosecute perpetrators (Fernández 2021). For instance, according to 2019 government data, "for every 100 women killed in Mexico only four result in sentences" (Morland and Pulice 2022). In response to these allegations, AMLO has deployed distinct discursive patterns to legitimize his behavior regarding the gender-based violence epidemic.

Through an interpretivist discourse analysis, this study endeavors to explore the discursive strategies of the AMLO administration to understand how political language may be used to justify accused legislative inaction in the face of public complaint. An interpretivist discourse analysis is best suited to this study because it allows for an examination of language that positions the discourse within social, economic, and political contexts. This contextual consideration facilitates an exploration of how discourse both reflects and informs attitudes and actions toward a specific issue—in this case, femicide (Bondarouk and Ruel 2004). In all, this study seeks to determine the consequences of this linguistic dynamic and illustrate how the politics of framing impact the conceptualization of and reaction to femicide.

The literature review examines previous scholarship on femicide and gender-based violence discourse to better contextualize, comprehend, and track the trends in this relationship. The first section positions the legal classification of femicide in academia. Next, the second section explores the contested classification of femicide in Mexico. The third section considers the relationship between discourse and policy. Finally, the fourth section looks at case studies concerning discourse analysis and femicide. Therefore, the literature review functions to classify femicide, situate rhetoric in relation to political action, and provide a general methodological framework for discourse analysis. Based on this overview, the research question of this study is: how does the political discourse produced by the Mexican president and his administration from November 2018 to December 2020 in commenting on cases of femicide in Mexico endeavor to legitimize accused policy inaction?

In keeping with the discourse-policy framework, this study hypothesizes that AMLO and his administration use specific rhetorical strategies to lessen their responsibility and shift blame to other parties. Alternative hypotheses to the research question could include the impact of legislative failure in drafting policies to protect women as well as biased reporting on political rhetoric surrounding femicide. Additionally, this study does not take into account the broadest spectrums of gender and sexuality in Mexico. There is no specific consideration given to transgender or indigenous women. However, this could be an interesting area of future study in terms of applying this model to rhetoric surrounding the violent targeting of Mexican transgender women. Finally, this framework controls for policy, meaning that it focuses on the rhetoric of the AMLO administration and does not seek to explore the disparity between the language and the policy that follows. Looking at how well the administration's recent political action reflects the discourse employed would be another interesting avenue for future research.

Literature Review

This study will draw on existing scholarship regarding discourse analysis and its relationship to the intersections of policy and femicide. To this end, the relevant literature is arranged into three overarching groups. As stated, the first section includes scholarship that explores the positioning of the term 'femicide' in academia to provide a panorama of its usage today. Next, the second section specifically looks at the controversies surrounding the legal and political classifications of femicide in Mexico. The third section evaluates sources that illustrate the connection between discourse and policy so as to provide an ontological foundation for the investigation. Finally, the fourth section will bridge the gap between the first three conversations by examining previous work on the relationship between discourse and femicide. This involves citing case studies to provide a more applied approach to the study. Overall, this review will supply a theoretical framework to the interpretive research design as well as identify gaps that this work may fill. There is a lack of discursive study on Mexican political actors, so this study will be able to supplement current scholarship by systematizing the relationship between political discourse and the legitimization of perceived lack of action concerning femicide in Mexico. In all, this study may introduce new insights to conceptualizations of the powers, practices, potentials, and pitfalls of discursive strategy.

'Femicide' in the Academic Conversation and Beyond

The term 'femicide' was first employed by feminist organizer Diana Russell (2011) when testifying at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in 1976. She originally classified it as "the misogynous killing of women by men" (Mishra 2022, 2). As Mishra (2022) expands, this term assumes a structural, sexist power dynamic between men and women that manifests in systemic violence (2). Hence, she claims that the definition of femicide signals the "sexist oppression of females" and the "patriarchal oppression of girls and women" (Mishra 2022, 3). Further, the term recalls "intrinsic structural flaws," making it "an

embodiment of symbolic forms of gender-based violence" with "socio-political undertones" (Mishra 2022, 3). There is a broad acknowledgement within the scholarship on femicide that the term itself highlights structural and institutional culpability in violence against women and girls, serving as much more than a classification of an interpersonal crime like homicide.

In a recent publication, the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021) provides a conceptual framework to classify femicide on a case-by-case basis. It first identifies two legal definitions of femicide: direct and indirect. These two definitions distinguish the homicide of a female from femicide. Direct femicide refers to the killing of women as prompted by interpersonal gender dynamics. This often manifests as family-related or intimate partner femicide (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021, 9). In contrast, indirect femicide refers to "constellations of a misogynist structure of society, politics and the state" which position gender-based killings of women in "larger 'unequal gender structures'" that contribute to this violence (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021, 5). The Institute proposes five contextual levels to analyze femicide through a legal lens: political, societal/cultural, criminal, sexual, and interpersonal. Emphasizing the existence of overlap between categories, the Institute declares that the observance of a combination of these variables may lead to a more streamlined legal classification of femicide. This framework also notes the interchangeable usage of 'femicide' and 'gender-based killings of women,' arguing that the latter simply defines the former (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021, 5).

The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability offers a different legal classification system for femicide. Under this model, two types of femicide are identified: intimate femicide and non-intimate femicide. Intimate femicide is defined as "the killing of women by current or former partners" (Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability). Non-intimate femicide is defined as "the killing of women by someone with whom they did not share an intimate partner relationship" to include "familial femicide, 'other known perpetrator' femicide and stranger femicide" (Canadian Femicide

Observatory for Justice and Accountability). The Observatory further identifies subcategories of femicide: armed conflict femicide, associated/connected femicide, culturally framed femicide, female-perpetrated femicide, femicide in the context of human trafficking, femicide in the context of sex work, genital mutilation-related femicide, lesbophobic femicide, organized crime-related femicide, racist femicide, and transphobic femicide (Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability). In comparison to the European Institute for Gender Equality framework, this classification system is more specific in naming subcategories of violence and adopts a different approach to initially separating femicide into two categories. Hence, there is no standard framework that maps the classification of indicators of femicide. Yet, the various models proposed follow a general format that looks at the cultural, sexual, relational, familial, structural, and criminal components to the violence.

A large contribution to the academic understanding of femicide concerning Mexico is Domínguez and Ravelo's (2003) study on interpretations of femicide in Ciudad Juárez. They explore the hypotheses of various social actors to explain the violence, concluding that victimization is a powerful tool in maintaining relationships of dominance in the area (Domínguez and Ravelo 2003, 122). In her analysis of Domínguez and Ravelo's work, Castañeda (2016) summarizes that "there is a relationship between the sex-gender structure, domination mechanisms, the supranational economic system and the exacerbation of fear as ways of exclusion and submission" (1057). In other words, this academic contribution solidified the acknowledgement of a connection between political dominance, submission, and fear as channeled through discourses on femicide.

Classifications of Femicide in Mexico

Moving from conversations on framework, it is important to acknowledge where the term 'femicide' stands today in Mexico. In 2012, the Mexican penal code classified femicide as distinct from homicide, introducing gender dimensions in the law relating to murder (Pandit

2022). However, subcategories of femicide in the nation have not been thoroughly classified, and enforcement against the crime has been lackluster. This is exemplified by the increase of cases after the introduction of the policy rather than a decrease (Fernández 2021). For example, since 2015, a mere three years following the change to the penal code, the number of gender-motivated killings of women in Mexico doubled. As a result of this lack of protection as well as the prevalence of femicide in the state, almost 80 percent of Mexican women report feelings of danger and the absence of safety (Fernández 2021). Hence, even the most publicized legislative strategy to dissuade gender-based killing of women failed, suggesting that other political factors are at play to hinder bureaucratic responses and legitimize underperformance.

When asked about the femicidal scourge in various press conferences, AMLO has been recorded expressing grievance with the attention that the killings receive domestically and internationally as it takes away from his political action in other spheres (Agren 2020). Further, his administration has been blamed by advocacy groups for dismissing cases of femicide, repudiating victims, condemning the street protests marching against his allegedly insensitive rhetoric, and claiming the culpability of "the neoliberalism of previous [Mexican] governments" (Fernández 2021). Ni Una Menos, Comando Plath, and other feminist resistance movements that reach across Latin America are mobilizing against the perceived lack of political action and accountability concerning gender-based violence, and more specifically, femicide. Spurred by these movements, thousands of Mexican women have protested in the streets, organized annual marches, and coordinated nationwide strikes (Alcoba and McGowan 2020). In doing so, they strive to promote awareness, press for protection, and advocate for justice. These movements support the accusations that AMLO and his administration are falling short by rejecting systemic considerations of the issue that emphasize legal, social, and patriarchal institutional culpability (Alcoba and McGowan 2020). Therefore, while there is a general academic consensus on the meaning of femicide, attitudes

toward its legal and political implications are contested in Mexico by legislators, policymakers, and women's rights advocates.

Discourse and Policy Relationship

Before entering into a critical discourse analysis, it is imperative to understand why rhetorical strategies are so powerful in concept construction and justification, especially concerning political action. In his study, Howarth (2010) first defines power in relation to the establishment of "political frontiers" and how the exercise of power serves to "naturalize" distributions of dominance (309). Howarth (2010) then goes on to articulate a five-step approach to critical policy studies that prioritizes "normative evaluation" of political action (328). As Howarth (2010) explains, because power "constitutes and produces practices, policies, and regimes," the exercise of power calls for "the sedimentation and reproduction of social relations via the mobilization of various techniques of political management" (310). These techniques include the discursive strategies used to justify certain political actions (310). Bacchi (2010) supports Howarth's claims regarding rhetoric and the justification of bureaucratic affairs by focusing on the "active marshalling of discourses for political purposes" (45). In her research, Bacchi (2010) explores the various uses of the term 'discourse' within academia, concluding that scholars often use it in the context of "political projects that challenge current 'relations of domination'" (55). As a result of this finding, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing "contradiction and multiplicity" in order to leave "space for challenge" that acknowledges the ambiguity of interpretation (Bacchi 2010, 55). It is clear in both Bacchi and Howarth's work that discourse holds considerable political and symbolic power because, as Bacchi (2010) writes, discourses "provide meanings that assist particular groups to maintain positions of influence" (55). However, the way in which scholars approach situating discourse in an analytical framework is less agreed upon.

Gasper and Apthorpe (1996) draw more applicable connections between discourse and policy regarding which strategies are

conventionally used to justify specific action and frame it in a positive light. For instance, they argue that the "naming" of specific policy strategies such as those targeting the "rural poor" or the "landless" contributes to a construction of "polar," "binary" worlds that manipulate dualism to legitimize legislation (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996, 7). Finally, Bondarouk and Ruel (2004) outline a discourse analysis framework that builds on the assumption that "knowledge is gained only through social constructions" (3). They identify the complex practice of making meaning as fundamental to understanding political exchange (Bondarouk and Ruel 2004, 4). In establishing this foundation, Bondarouk and Ruel (2004) codify the study of discourse as both a theory and method in political contexts (6). In all, works of scholarship that explore how discourse frames political realities are in healthy supply within the academic realm. However, this study will further elucidate how discourse may be used to support legitimization strategies within a specific political and social context.

More specifically, Castañeda's (2016) study on the academic, activist, and artistic discourse on femicide in Mexico lays a foundation for political rhetorical analysis in the region. She explores how the language used in attempts to explain or decry femicide feeds into "the domain and privileges of gender, class, ethnicity or race" (Castañeda 2016, 1065). Moreover, she identifies how the right-wing "adopts human rights terminology" and casts family violence as the root of social discord (Castañeda 2016, 1066). This approach is revelatory concerning legitimizing rhetorical strategies in Mexico and their relationship to policy. Thus, Castañeda's research is essential to the development of this study regarding the AMLO administration's discursive moves in attempts to pacify dissenters.

Discourse and Femicide Relationship

There have been several published case studies that explore the relationship between discourse and femicide, though these investigations take on other dimensions that depart from those purely political. For example, Boonzaier (2022) looks at how reports of cases of

femicide in the South African national media draw on racial and gendered tropes which frame public perception of the violence. As Boonzaier (2022) argues, media reports of the murders present them as abnormal, thus neglecting acknowledgment of the systemic nature of the violence as perpetrated by the patriarchal and colonial foundations of the state and shaping incomplete popular perception (91).

In contrast to Boonzaier, Bandelli (2017) analyzes the discourses and counter discourses surrounding femicide in Italy but enters into the political realm, performing a discourse analysis on the political language used to discuss femicide in Italy during the national electoral campaign in 2012. Through analyzing the rhetorical patterns and language used by candidates, she identifies the common strategy of signaling political virtue and progressivity (Bandelli 2017). She classifies this virtue signaling as a way to deny responsibility for femicide by removing attention from accusations of bureaucratic shortcomings and focusing on increasing female representation in the political sphere as a block to violence (Bandelli 2017). Berns (2001) builds on the examination of this policy-discourse relationship concerning femicide in her investigation into "political discourse and women and violence." She claims that women are typically held responsible for gender-based violence to avoid situating these issues within a "patriarchal framework," thus normalizing this behavior and detracting from male responsibility (Berns 2001, 252). While this analysis does not focus specifically on femicide, it addresses the patterns involved in gender-based killings of women that this study may draw on.

In general, discourse analyses of femicide in Mexico often focus on the portrayal of victims and perpetrators as well as the language used in national reporting on the killings. While there are not many discursive studies that look at Mexican actors in the context of femicide, there are certainly a few pertinent ones to discuss. Tomczak-Boczko (2023) performs an ethnographic analysis on individuals from Guadalajara, Mexico. In comparing interviews dealing with everyday violence in Mexico, Tomczak-Boczko (2023) finds that the attitudes of the interviewees toward perpetrators differ depending on the victim and the way they are spoken about (485). For example, in cases of intimate

partner violence against women, female interviewees never named the man as 'the perpetrator' but instead 'the husband' (Tomczak-Boczko 2023, 497). This practice of looking at the relationality of the perpetrator, Tomczak-Boczko (2023) argues, normalizes the violence as interpersonal identification is prioritized over naming blame (495). Additionally, she examines how the use of the third person plural justifies intimate partner violence, as interviewees tended to say, 'they beat each other' instead of 'he beat her' (Tomczak-Boczko 2023, 497). Thus, Tomczak-Boczko (2023) concludes that the behavior of a perpetrator is often generalized in speech practices of individuals from Guadalajara, rhetorically excusing interpersonal violence (498). This study often discusses intimate partner violence but deals with everyday violence as a whole. While it serves as an example of a discourse analysis on Mexican actors, it does not look at political rhetoric, nor does it focus specifically on femicide.

Similarly, while Goßen's (2022) discourse analysis of the Mexican press does not center around the specific content or actors of this particular study, it does offer another example of a rhetorical investigation in the region. Goßen (2022) examines opinion pieces from various Mexican media outlets that comment on AMLO's refusal to congratulate Biden on his 2020 election win (359). By identifying discursive patterns of the media in characterizing Trump, Biden, and AMLO, Goßen (2022) explores how outlets use distance to position political actors and prove their own credibility (378). Again, while this investigation does not specifically deal with femicide or the language used by political actors, it does provide a model of discourse analysis in Mexico.

Literature Review Conclusion

Overall, there is comprehensive scholarship on the relationship between discourse and policy as well as the terminology behind femicide even while there are contending stances on its origins, implications, and uses. Additionally, there have been several case studies on a diverse variety of actors regarding gender-based violence

against women that build on theoretical conceptualizations of the power of discourse. These sources provide a helpful contextual, theoretical, and analytical framework for evaluating femicide discourse without necessarily dealing with the political. There is a notable lack of discursive study on Mexican actors, specifically politicians and legislators, despite the prevalence of femicide in the country. This study endeavors to fill the gap by increasing understanding of how the political discourse produced by the Mexican president and his administration regarding femicide works to legitimize accused policy inaction. Thus, this study will supplement the current academic conversation on the relationship between discourse, policy, and gender-based violence against women.

Research Design

In order to understand the legitimizing powers of administrative discourse in relation to the Mexican presidential administration and femicide, this study employed a critical discourse analysis framework to evaluate press conference transcripts. This approach involved rhetorical analysis to examine broader cultural narratives concerning politics and gender. Thus, it allowed for a comprehensive look at the nuances and patterns in the language produced by the AMLO administration to explore how it served to justify accused inaction. To qualify, accused policy inaction was defined as when media representatives or the public claim that the administration is not doing enough to mitigate femicide. By legitimizing accused policy inaction, the administration attempted to refute the claims that they failed, instead arguing that they were succeeding in protecting women and discouraging femicide.

Each press conference transcript published on the Mexican Government's official database from November 2018 to December 2020 was examined. As a note, the transcripts were read directly in Spanish to retain the cultural cues and nuances maintained in the local style of speech. These transcripts were chosen as the subjects of this study since they articulated the administrative stance on combating femicide when faced with public pressure. In other words, the dynamic this study attempted to systematize was put on full display in the interactions

between administrative representatives and those that question their methods. The majority of the press conferences placed AMLO himself as the primary subject, but others included various members of his administration such as Alfonso Durazo, the Secretary of Security and Civilian Protection, and Olga Sánchez Cordero, the Secretary of the Interior. The first transcript examined (and the first recorded on the database) was dated November 30, 2018, and the most recent transcript studied was from December 31, 2020, in keeping with the timeframe outlined in the research design.

For each of the 1,221 transcripts published in this period, 'feminicidio' was digitally searched in the text. This narrowed the selection down to the 57 documents that contained the term. The search was not widened to other key terms because this study was looking for discussion on this specific phenomenon, and the term 'feminicidio' would be sufficient to capture the administration's rhetorical response to inquiries concerning this certain form of violence. The synonym for 'femicide' used most often in the broader academic conversation, 'gender-based killings of women,' is considered equivalent because of its specificity. However, the Spanish version of this phrase, 'asesinatos de mujeres por motivos de género,' is not commonly used as revealed throughout the course of this investigation. Thus, it was not deemed necessary to expand the search from 'feminicidio.'

Since 57 transcripts contained the term 'feminicidio,' only 4.67% of the press conferences from over a two-year period featured discussions on femicide despite its prevalence. Additionally, only 0.57% of press conferences included members of the AMLO administration introducing the topic of femicide without any rhetorical impetus other than reporting general statistics on violent crimes in the state. All other discussions of femicide recorded in the transcripts were prompted by questions from the media representatives in attendance. This lack of discursive initiative already seemed to speak to the administration's avoidance in discussing violent gender-based crime against women.

After marking the 57 relevant transcripts, each one was then examined, using 'feminicidio' as a guiding term in identifying the sections where bureaucratic responses to femicide were most

comprehensively discussed. From these closer examinations, four distinct rhetorical strategies were identified to have been employed by administrative representatives and the president himself in responding to press inquiries concerning federal plans to address femicide. These four strategies were classified as follows: conflation, virtue signaling, deflection, and generalization. Conflation was defined as the lumping of discussions on femicide with other violent crimes. This definition took inspiration from Comninos' (2016) exploration of how conflation impacts interpretation and application – specifically, how the conflation of human rights and humanitarianism leads to jurisdiction tensions (2). Next, virtue signaling was defined as the practice of placing emphasis on the perceived positives of the administration to take attention away from accused inadequacies. The development of this strategy stemmed from Bandelli's (2017) classification of virtue signaling in her investigation into the rhetoric on femicide used by candidates in Italy's 2012 national election as described in the literature review. Deflection was defined as the removal of attention on the administration through placing focus on other parties. This definition was influenced by Berns' (2001) examination of how placing blame can minimize the culpability of a party and a system. Finally, generalization was defined as the mention of a response to femicide without detail. The classification of this strategy was informed by Tomczak-Boczko's (2023) study on how the use of generalized language impacts the perception of the dynamics of violence as described in the literature review. Each of these strategies were employed in various press conferences, oftentimes in tandem with one another, to legitimize accused policy inaction and respond to probing inquiries in an appeasing way. Finally, every transcript was coded, indicating which strategies were incorporated by the administrative representatives as well as the frequency of each.

It is critical to address the researcher's perspective in approaching this study to be as transparent as possible in how bias may impact discursive interpretations. The researcher is in the practice of examining gender-based violence against women through a historical lens focusing on the legacy of colonialism which informs how they interpret political discourse on femicide in Mexico. Additionally, their Western

international relations orientation, progressive political leaning, and lack of travel to Mexico influence their lack of complete objectivity as a human research instrument. Finally, their prior knowledge of the Spanish language supplements their pursuit of this project, as they may retain the cultural nuance in the interpretations.

Research Design Conclusion

This study pursued a critical discourse analysis of the language produced by the AMLO administration during press conferences from November 2018 to December 2020 to better understand how discourse may be used to legitimize policy and defend against accusations of political inefficiency. Moving forward, methods of conflation, virtue signaling, deflection, and generalization will be considered as rhetorical patterns in the discourse are identified. Hence, this study will attempt to supplement the existing scholarship on the relationship between discourse and policy through applying the identified theoretical concepts to an examination of femicide and legitimization. Overall, this study endeavors to contribute to conversations that prove the power of language by showing how that very power reaches conversations on gender-based violence against women and policy defense.

Analysis

Each strategy is individually analyzed. The strategies are organized in order from most frequent to least frequent. The percentages shown in Table 1 reflect the number of transcripts with each strategy out of the 57 total transcripts. Every transcript displayed at least one strategy and most expressed more than one, hence why the total count of coded language is greater than 57. As seen, conflation occurred most frequently, then virtue signaling, deflection, and finally generalization. Each transcript was recorded in Spanish, and the quotes presented are the researcher's translations unless otherwise indicated.

Strategy	Conflation	Virtue Signaling	Deflection	Generalization
Count	41	32	26	25
Percentage	71.93%	56.14%	45.61%	43.86%

Table 1 - Strategy Distribution

Conflation

In this study, the strategy of rhetorical conflation deals directly with how the crime of femicide is classified and involves the lumping of discussions on femicide with other violent crimes to take attention away from institutional and patriarchal culpability. In other words, listing femicide in relation to other violent crimes such as general homicide, robbery, kidnapping, and extortion implies that each function similarly and are born of a comparable impulse. Hence, the role of patriarchal oppression and increased vulnerability as a result of gender in femicide is overlooked. By positioning femicide in relation to other crimes, the "patriarchal oppression of girls and women" that Mishra (2022) identifies as the driving factor of femicide is diluted (3).

When AMLO was asked about standardizing responses to femicide across the country during a transition of power for the Mexico City Head of Government in his August 26, 2019, conference, he stated "when Claudia took control of the Head of Government there were many homicides in general in the city" (Presidencia de la República - 26 de Agosto 2019). By framing his response in terms of how the new government head, Claudia Sheinbaum, was taking initiative to address "homicides in general," AMLO's language serves to conflate femicide with homicide. Thus, he neglects to acknowledge the patriarchal, systemic influence that originally created and contemporarily sustains an environment in which gender-based killings of women may occur. In many Mexican counties, the jail sentences for femicide are years longer than for murder (The Economist 2020). Hence, this rhetorical conflation of femicide has major legal consequences when it comes to sentencing perpetrators.

Similar to the previous conference, in the January 10, 2020, conference, when the governor of Chihuahua and the president were asked to clarify the nature of the statistics presented on femicide in the nation, the former responded, "here is the graph of crimes of homicide" (Presidencia de la República - 10 de Enero 2020). When asked specifically about femicide, the governor, another prominent political figure, once again labels the crimes as homicides, overlooking and ultimately blurring the defining gendered aspect of femicide. On February 26, 2020, when AMLO was asked about whether he referred to femicide in the demographic diagnostics he shared in his presentation, he answered "every day, every day, we have a list of daily homicides" (Presidencia de la República - 26 de Febrero 2020). Not only does this pattern deny patriarchal and institutional culpability involved with the perpetuation of femicide in Mexico, but it appears to be relatively fixed throughout the period of study. Thus, this strategy seems stable regarding political discursive strategy to lessen administrative accountability.

Along with muddying the distinction between femicide and homicide, the administration often brings up the former in the context of a wide array of violent crimes, again diminishing the structural implications of the killings. For instance, in his address on October 14, 2019, AMLO declared: "they are now added as crimes that require preventive detention: abuse or sexual violence against minors, femicide, robbery of houses, use of social programs for electoral purposes, corruption" (Presidencia de la República - 14 de Octubre 2019). Hence, this discursive pattern places the violent killing of women based on their gender within comparable context with robbery and other such offenses. This functions to lessen institutional culpability regarding systemic prejudice toward females. Further, the usage of this strategy suggests the necessity of a blanket response to all lawlessness in the nation, relieving targeted political pressure to an extent. As shown in Table 1, out of the 57 original transcripts, 41 featured the conflation strategy, meaning that 71.93% of AMLO administration press conferences containing discussions of femicide involved the lumping of the classification of the crime with other offenses. Hence, this strategy

was the most common of the four. In all, the consequence of conflation is the neutralization of femicide so as to be considered in regard to other crimes, neglecting the gender element key to understanding, addressing, and prosecuting the targeted violence.

Virtue Signaling

Virtue signaling is the practice of stating other areas in which progress has been made and placing emphasis on the perceived positives of the administration to take attention away from accused inadequacies (Bandelli 2017). The AMLO administration capitalizes on this strategy in 56.14% of the transcripts by stating how hard it has been working to mitigate other issues as well as how progressive it is in prioritizing gender equality. For instance, on August 13, 2019, one media representative pointed out how several members of the police violated a young girl and identified the rise in femicide cases in Mexico during the month. In response, the commander of the National Guard, Luis Rodríguez Bucio, stated:

> In the training carried out by the personnel, both veterans and new personnel, we have a subject called detaining and driving people, simply so that the National Guard personnel, both men and women – we also have female staff in the National Guard – learn precisely the protocols of how to carry out an arrest (Presidencia de la República - 13 de Agosto 2019).

In making a point to emphasize how the National Guard consists of females as well as males, this statement appears to remove some institutional and political responsibility by highlighting a supposed advancement in gender equality and representation on the force. Further, this female representation works to establish the Mexican National Guard as a more reliable resource for women vulnerable to physical assault based on their gender. This focus on female representation is a common theme throughout the press conferences over the two-year period, appearing in more than 35% of the

transcripts. Thus, it is clear that the administration considers placing focus on the institutional advancements made by women as a viable strategy for justifying accused inaction regarding femicide.

Similarly, on August 19, 2019, when a reporter brought attention to the fact that the number of femicides continued to increase, leaving women in fear for their lives, AMLO responded:

> We are working every day for that cause, from six in the morning, sometimes earlier. That is our main subject, to guarantee the security of men and women, we are permanently engaged in that, we are not neglecting the problem, we are not delegating it to others, almost the whole government is oriented to guarantee peace in the country (Presidencia de la República - 19 de Agosto 2019).

Hence, AMLO is intentional about emphasizing the amount of work his administration puts into preserving the peace of the country, seemingly legitimizing the federal response to femicide by arguing for the claimed diligence of the reaction. On February 14, 2020, he did this even more directly, proclaiming that he had spent "more than 40 years fighting for just causes" (Presidencia de la República - 14 de Febrero 2020). This move to emphasize the self-proclaimed progress of the administration when met with media probing and pushback seems to dilute the conversation regarding femicide response.

Finally, on October 23, 2019, when asked to reconcile the numbers cited in the introductory press conference presentation regarding a reduction in crime with the increase in homicides and femicides, AMLO replied "please direct attention to vehicle theft, which is another crime that is reported, in which there is no black figure. Here we do achieve a considerable reduction" (Presidencia de la República - 23 de Octubre 2019). In redirecting focus from femicide to vehicle theft, AMLO works to justify accused policy inaction regarding the killing of females by highlighting progress in other areas. The consequence of the virtue signaling strategy is the dismissal of femicide as a specific issue requiring a targeted, contextualized response that considers the patriarchal makeup of the country's political, social, and economic systems. In other

words, this strategy suggests that complaints regarding response inadequacy may be appeased with progress in mitigating other crimes, advancements in gender equality and representation, and diligence reassurance. This ultimately stunts Mexico's ability to conceptualize and therefore comprehensively combat femicide.

Deflection

The strategy of deflection involves taking attention away from the administration through placing it on other parties such as the victims and their families, the police, and conservatives so as to minimize or deflect culpability (Berns 2001, 252). When directly asked to clarify the distinction between femicide and homicide apart from the targeting of vulnerable communities, AMLO responded:

> Look, I don't want the issue to be anything more than femicide, it's already very clear. Much has been manipulated on this issue in the media, not all of them of course, those that do not see us with good eyes take advantage of any circumstance to generate defamation campaigns (Presidencia de la República - 10 de Febrero 2020).

Instead of recognizing the difference between femicide and homicide as established by many academics in the field, AMLO deflects to misinformation campaigns. This blurs the definition of the crime, does little to aid in discursively clarifying the violence, and places culpability on the media instead of taking responsibility for the elevated number of cases.

Additionally, when asked about the relationship between public health and the mitigation of femicide in his February 25, 2020, press conference, AMLO stated:

> Although the conservatives and their spokesmen question me that I blame everything on neoliberalism, yes, it is because of neoliberalism, because of that approach of privatizing everything that the State failed to fulfill its social

responsibility (Presidencia de la República - 25 de Febrero 2020).

Thus, he implicates neoliberal ideology and political practices in accused inaction concerning femicide instead of acknowledging administrative shortcomings. In the same conference, AMLO also stated, "the problems of femicide and of violence originate from poverty, family disintegration, and child abandonment" (Presidencia de la República - 25 de Febrero 2020). Once again, the president removes blame from his administration and places it on issues with the family and economic instability, dismissing the defining elements of gender and patriarchy in understanding and combating the violence. As shown in Table 1, out of the 57 original transcripts, 26 featured the deflection strategy. This means that 45.61% of AMLO administration press conferences containing discussions of femicide involved the administration's deflection to other parties. The consequence of this deflection strategy is that the administration neglects its systemic and political culpability in failing to prevent femicide and bring justice to the victims. Hence, the current response is discursively legitimized while calls for further, more transformative action are dismissed.

Generalization

Lastly, generalization in this context takes the form of alluding to a specific response to femicide without actually going into detail. It looks as if action is being pursued but ultimately presents as evasive (Tomczak-Boczko 2023, 495). On February 14, 2020, AMLO stated, "we are against femicide, we are doing things every day, every day, to guarantee the peace and the tranquility" (Presidencia de la República - 14 de Febrero 2020). By using general words such as "cosas" (translated to "things" in the previous quote), AMLO signals action without providing any substance to his claims (Presidencia de la República - 14 de Febrero 2020). The articulated frustration of the press in response to his vague statements like this one clearly communicates the recognition of this generalization strategy. For instance, in the same conference, one

member of the press directly criticizes AMLO for his consistent "lack of clarity" in federal messages on femicide (Presidencia de la República - 14 de Febrero 2020). Thus, it appears that the press has identified the use of this strategy and is growing tired of its repetition.

Similarly, on April 6, 2020, concerning elevated occurrences of femicide, AMLO declared, "we are addressing this, it is a permanent, daily, serious concern and we will continue to act, supporting in everything" (Presidencia de la República - 6 de Abril 2020). Again, with the use of vague words such as "esto" and "todo" (translated to "this" and "everything" in the previous quote), AMLO and his administration neglect the specificity of femicide and its federal reply (Presidencia de la República - 6 de Abril 2020). As shown in Table 1, out of the 57 original transcripts, 25 featured the generalization strategy. This means that 43.86% of AMLO administration press conferences containing mentions of femicide involved the administration responding with ambiguity. The consequence of this generalization strategy is the pacifying of accusations concerning a lackluster response to femicide. Progress is promised without detail on how it will be achieved. As Tessler and Goodman (2018) describe, "the language of generalization displays subtle context-sensitivities that make it difficult to formalize" (5). In complex rhetorical situations such as conversations on policy, these context-sensitivities are more difficult to communicate with general language and the meaning is less formally developed. The administration's use of general language to describe policy responses to femicide thus obscures the meaning of the messages, rendering their actions superficial. They may keep up the appearance of dealing with the issue, but they do not supply substance or initiative to these claims. In other words, they appear to be doing enough, relieving pressure to act, yet they do not lay out a plan to actually do so, leaving the public confused and vulnerable.

Conclusion

To answer the initial research question, the political discourse of the Mexican president and his administration on femicide endeavors to

legitimize accused policy inaction by using the following strategies. By order of frequency, the first strategy is conflating femicide with other crimes to minimize the institutional culpability of the violence. The second is signaling administrative virtue to draw attention away from federal shortcomings in the response. The third is deflecting the conversation to implicate other parties and lighten governmental responsibility. Finally, the fourth is generalizing presidential reactions to create an allusion of action without the explicit expenditure of resources. These strategies work in tandem to justify the federal course taken to address the femicide epidemic in Mexico. By rhetorically conflating, signaling virtue, deflecting, and generalizing, the administration attempts to remove degrees of political pressure and attempts to appease policy critics. Hence, both political and public conceptualizations of femicide are somewhat obscured, influencing the lack of clarity in conversations regarding the violence and policies put in place to attempt to mitigate the killings. The discovery of these core strategies adds to the conversation surrounding femicide as it identifies discursive patterns in attempts to dismiss calls for greater action. Thus, key information is revealed concerning how to navigate the dynamic between political figures and the dissenting public in the context of killings based on femininity. Additionally, this research adds to the conversation of legitimizing discourse because it identifies concrete patterns, demonstrating how political actors in an administration often approach rhetorical justification and appease accusers. As such, these findings fill the academic gap by providing a framework to evaluate the discursive practices of Mexican political actors in the context of violence and accused institutional failure. Hence, the conversation on the relationships between discourse, gender-based violence against women, and policy is supplemented.

The challenges faced in this study include a narrowed time period of material, search term, and research scope. Intervening variables could include biased reporting, legislative failure, and the gender spectrum in Mexico. Further, this study does not look at how femicide disproportionately impacts indigenous and trans women. It would be interesting to see how the framework fares when adopting a more

expansive view of gender that centers the experience of trans women. Similarly, a study that evaluates the four strategies in political rhetoric on violence against indigenous women could also yield results that are more racially aware.

It might be difficult to apply this framework in full to other countries or political actors in Mexico with complete confidence given that this analysis only looks at the AMLO administration. However, in applications of this study, the relationship between discourse and femicide may continue to serve as a base to explore legitimizing political rhetoric. Some next steps could include a similar analysis to see if the strategies are present in other administrative situations around the world dealing with justifying policy in the face of public pushback. While this framework is built off of the Mexican government's parameters on the topic of femicide, in its purest sense, it systematizes the relationship between discourse and legitimizing policy responses. If taken out of the specific context of the study, it would be interesting to see if this model would hold up in other situations, especially since the four strategies are more generally defined. For instance, this framework could be applied to evaluate how former US President Donald Trump endeavored to legitimize his response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Would the model still apply? It would be worthwhile to find out. Additionally, if proven more generally, this research could contextualize comparisons of the legitimizing discourse of political actors in democratic nations with those in authoritarian regimes. This could enhance understandings of how governmental structure plays a role in influencing or prioritizing discursive political strategy. In a time filled with so much social and political turmoil, this research is integral to recognizing, navigating, and even interrogating the legitimizing discourse of different governments and political actors across the globe so as to better understand policy action and the push for progress.

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